

NEBRASKA TRS ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING
Public Service Commission Hearing Room
300 The Atrium, 1200 N Street
Lincoln, Nebraska
January 13, 2005

The Nebraska Telecommunications Relay Advisory Committee met on January 13, 2005 at the Public Service Commission Hearing Room in Lincoln, Nebraska.

There being a quorum present, the meeting was called to order at 12:38 p.m. by Tami Richardson-Nelson. The following committee members were present:

Mr. Eric Carstenson;
Mr. James Devaney;
Ms. Tami Richardson-Nelson;
Mr. Art Nelson;
Ms. Patti Reitz.

Commissioner Gerald Vap and Jerry Hohnbaum were absent.

Introduction of Guests: Present from the Nebraska Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (NCDHH) was Tanya Wendel. Gene Hand and Steve Stovall were present from the Public Service Commission. Present from Hamilton Telecommunications were Dixie Ziegler and Barb Handrup. Francis Beaurivage and Barb Woodhead interpreted the meeting.

Approval of the Agenda: Two changes to the agenda were proposed. Mr. Stovall recommended removing item 3, titled, "PSC Commission Report", under section 8, "Public Service Commission Comments." Ms. Wendel suggested adding item 7.2 "TRS member terms." Motion by Mr. Devaney to accept the agenda as revised. Ms. Reitz seconded. Upon agreement of all committee members present, the agenda was approved as revised. It was agreed to remove under Old Business, "Consent Form for NEDP", since this activity cannot be effectively administered.

Approval of the Minutes of September 23, 2004: One change made by Tami Richardson-Nelson. On page 1, item 2 the reference to Sprint should be changed to HTC ("Hamilton Telecommunications Company"). Motion made by Mr. Nelson to accept the minutes as corrected. Seconded by Mr. Devaney. Upon agreement of all committee members present, the minutes were approved as corrected.

Chairperson's Comments:

1.) Tami Richardson-Nelson expressed appreciation to all the sponsors of the Omaha and Lincoln high-speed connectivity demonstrations. There were around 145 present in Omaha and 92 in Lincoln. Thanks were also extended to OAD ("Omaha Association for the Deaf"), the

Lincoln Association for the Deaf, the NCDHH and the PSC for their participation and support.

2.) Tami suggested a formal motion should be made under “New Business” for reimbursement of travel/lodging expenses for TRS Advisory members participating in future workshops. There are two more scheduled; one in Kearney on March 5 and one in Scottsbluff at a date yet to be determined. Mr. Hohnbaum is selecting the Kearney location.

3.) Tami expressed concern over high rates for cable companies and a request to reduce rates is being solicited to enable increased accessibility for deaf/hard of hearing users.

4.) Issues regarding high speed connections were brought up by Tami. Questions on who exercises authority over DSL, cable companies and other high speed providers were voiced.

5.) Tami asked about the status of brochures and other fact sheets for VRS and IP relay products. Hamilton indicated these are available and will be provided for future workshops. The applicant package for the NEDP will also be provided by the PSC. Committee members suggested conducting the future workshops using an open house approach. Extended time for questions and answers would be accommodated using this format.

Issues on interstate/intrastate jurisdiction were addressed. The Public Service Commission exercises quality of service issues over wireline based telephone services, but not the internet. The FCC currently has taken the position that internet is an interstate service and as such, limits state jurisdiction. Several decisions are expected at the national level this year that will impact telecom service. Mr. Hand indicated that the issue affects many areas of telecom service. Taxation of services for end users as well as how interconnecting carriers are compensated for use of their networks (being addressed in the “Intercarrier Compensation Forum”) has to be resolved as well.

Vice Chairperson’s Comments: None presented.

Nebraska Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (NCDHH) Comments:

1.) NeHAC (Nebraskan’s for Hearing Aid Coverage). Ms. Wendel provided two handouts for discussion; a) fact sheet on “Sounds Good to the Ear” and b) proposal for PSC to allow hearing aid coverage through NEDP.

Ms. Wendel indicated a meeting was held with Senator Byars to address funding and legislative issues. A bill will not be presented this session, but more information gathering will be done to determine the next plan of action.

The proposal to fund hearing aid coverage through NEDP was shared. The proposal indicates a percentage of the cost would be funded by the NEDP. The cost of hearing aid technology in the midwest area ranges from \$1,200 to \$2,400 per instrument. Mr. Carstenson indicated that telephone users may not be receptive to the possibility of surcharge increases on telephone bills to fund expanded services. Facility bypass may result in decreased funding as

users migrate to the internet-based or other specialized networks if users can avoid surcharges. Mr. Hand indicated that the bill may need language changes that may include, "... all providers of voice services in a manner that is competitively neutral...". Mr. Hand volunteered to work with Ms. Wendel on language. The bill may need to incorporate income guidelines.

2.) Member's Terms. Ms. Wendel indicated that Tami Richardson-Nelson and Art Nelson agreed to serve another three-year term. Their terms will now commence through 1/31/2008.

Public Service Commission Comments:

1.) Updated Relay Statistics – Steve Stovall. Mr. Stovall presented updated relay statistics through actual December, 2004. Mr. Stovall indicated that the calls and minutes of use are in a gradual state of decline, as compared to the same period one year ago. Mr. Stovall indicated a hearing has been scheduled for March 9, 2005 at 10:00 a.m. in the Commission hearing room for determining the TRS surcharge. The assessment period for this surcharge is July 1, 2005 through June 30, 2006.

2.) Equipment Distribution Program update – Steve Stovall. Mr. Stovall indicated that equipment payments to vendors is still strong. Particularly, the months of November and December with payments of \$40,076 and \$38,275, respectively. CapTel units are steadily increasing with payments of \$1,197, \$2,539 and \$9,119 for the months of October through December, respectively. December results indicated 47 CapTel users. Mr. Stovall indicated that the contract addendum signed with Hamilton allows the program to add 10 CapTel users per month after meeting the initial 50-user threshold.

Discussion centered on Nebraska allowing a multiple vendor environment for VRS and whether the FCC should make this a mandatory service. Problems concerning the differences between interstate versus state funding methodologies were shared. Though a multiple environment would enhance consumer choice, problems with increased funding, difficulties in budgeting for multiple providers and jurisdictional issues would have to be addressed.

Hamilton Telecommunications Comments (Ms. Ziegler/Ms. Handrup):

Ms. Ziegler continued with the discussion from above regarding VRS service/funding issues. Ms. Ziegler indicated that for a call to be paid from the Nebraska fund, the call must originate *and terminate* within the state. This poses a problem if the physical location of a call cannot be determined, particularly true with VRS and IP relay services.

A decrease in traditional relay calls in Nebraska is continuing. Users shifting to IP and VRS services is contributing to the decrease in traditional relay minutes of use. Growth in mobile wireless technology is another factor. Ms. Ziegler indicated Hamilton has a website for users of mobile wireless devices to facilitate communication. VRS is provided from the Silver Springs, Maryland center.

Hamilton has stepped up outreach efforts to include nursing homes/assisted living care centers. Ms. Ziegler indicated brochures on VRS/IP/Wireless technology will be provided at the workshops.

1.) Demonstration of New Equipment (VRS Demonstration). Demonstration provided by Ms. Ziegler and participants from the committee.

Ms. Handrup expressed the desire in having a more “open house” format for the next two workshops to allow for more question and answer time.

Service coverage issues were shared by the committee. It was noted that potential customers need to be informed regarding the coverage area that wireless services will work. Digital technology does not cover the same area as analog, so facility improvements may be necessary. This can drive the cost of providing service higher.

Ms. Wendel expressed appreciation to Hamilton for involvement in the high-speed connectivity workshops.

Ms. Tami-Richardson Nelson indicated that the Iowa School for the Deaf is interested in these connectivity workshops, possibly one in the Council Bluffs area.

New Business: Mr. Nelson made a motion recommending to the Commission that the surcharge remain at \$.07 for the next assessment period July 1, 2005 through June 30, 2006. Mr. Devaney seconded. Upon agreement of all committee members present, motion carried.

(Ms. Tami-Richardson Nelson deferred Chair to Mr. Carstenson to preside over next motion). Motion made by Tami requesting the Commission to authorize TRS Advisory Committee members who attend the connectivity workshops be reimbursed for mileage and out-of-town board and lodging. Seconded by Mr. Devaney. Upon agreement of all committee members present, motion carried. Chair relinquished by Mr. Carstenson.

Ms. Reitz moved to close new business.

Public Comment: None.

Next Meeting: Tentatively scheduled for the March, 2005 timeframe.

Meeting adjourned at 2:41 p.m. by Ms. Tami Richardson-Nelson.

Respectfully submitted,

Steven G. Stovall - Staff Accountant
Nebraska Public Service Commission
January 25, 2005

Enclosures:

1) Updated Membership List (Note, this list now contains the representative capacities each member is serving).